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Fables of the Holocaust: Hansel and Gretel

In the vast domain of Holocaust literature ("understood broadly as literary works for which the historical context of the Holocaust is of major significance"[1]), I intend to focus on a group of novels whose plots evoke the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel." In the Brothers Grimm's collection this is one of the darkest tales. In the novels I will analyse, the story becomes a metaphor for the violation of children's rights and human dignity.

The horrors of the Holocaust caused the European countries to establish the Charter for the Protection of Human Rights (1948). The problem of children's rights officially came to the fore with the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 2, 1990. This charter was built upon the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1920; it was later adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, and, in its extended form, by the United Nations in 1959.

The Geneva Declaration set the first principles for the protection of the child:

> By the present Declaration of the Rights of the Child, commonly known as "Declaration of Geneva," men and women of all nations, recognizing that mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give, declare and accept it as their duty that, beyond and above all considerations of race, nationality or creed:
>
> 1) The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually;
> 2) The child that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed; the child that is backward must be helped; the delinquent child must be reclaimed; and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succored;
> 3) The child must be the first to receive relief in times of distress;
> 4) The child must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation;
> 5) The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of fellow men.[2]

The United Nations 1959 Declaration extended the previous points and formulated ten main principles:

1 Jenni Adams, *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature* (London, New York, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2014), Ebook, 1 of 337.

2 Available at: http://www.un-documents.net/gdrc1924.htm (last access 28 December 2015).

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1. The right to equality, without distinction on account of race, religion or national origin.
2. The right to special protection for the child's physical, mental and social development.
3. The right to a name and a nationality.
4. The right to adequate nutrition, housing and medical services.
5. The right to special education and treatment when a child is physically or mentally handicapped.
6. The right to understanding and love by parents and society.
7. The right to recreational activities and free education.
8. The right to be among the first to receive relief in all circumstances.
9. The right to protection against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.
10. The right to be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, and universal brotherhood.[3]

In addition, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, implemented on September 2, 1990) defines much more clearly the rights every child is entitled to; it also specifies the span of time that the definition of "child" entails. For instance, this charter emphasizes the child's freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, the responsibilities of the parents towards the child, its right to mental and spiritual development, hence the right to education, the so-called "right in trust." All these points recognise human dignity in the child, who should also be allowed a voice and the possibility to express an opinion.

In recent years a proliferation of novels has emerged, centred on the denunciation of the horrors of the Holocaust. The first question that arises is: why now? Why now after so many years since the end of the WWII? As Primo Levi stated in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), one of his testimonial works as a survivor from the camps, survivors had no voice because horror exceeded language. No language was adequate to describe what was indescribable; moreover, people were not willing to listen. Therefore, survivors were effectively deprived of a voice. Geoffrey Hartman in his *Scars of the Spirit* (2002) speaks of this further spiritual violence against the survivors. These horrors of history needed time to be expressed: history had to elaborate its burden in order to find its own voice.

In the horrific elimination of millions of people, children were not given a special voice. Therefore, the three novels under discussion deal specifically with the effects of persecution on children: namely, how their perception of the events appeared to them obscure and inexpressible.

My investigation will focus on the violation of children's rights and human dignity during the Holocaust, keeping in mind the main principles of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The discrepancy between the points

3 Available at: http://www.humanium.org/en/childrens-rights-history/references-on-child-rights/declaration-rights-child/ (last access 28 December 2015).

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outlined in this charter and the actual treatment of children during the Nazi persecution makes these novels disturbing and will solicit our sympathetic imagination.

Before starting our analysis, another fundamental question should arise: why fairy tales? Why "Hansel and Gretel" in particular? In the postmodern world, fairy tales have been revised and re-interpreted, as I have extensively argued elsewhere[4]. Whereas feminist writers such as Angela Carter, Antonia S. Byatt, Emma Donoghue – just to mention a few – subvert the masculine world as typified in fairy tales to expose their patriarchal perspective, Holocaust novels, where the protagonists are children, use fairy tales as a key into children's psychology. This device provides a way to show how reality was perceived by a child who could not come to terms with the incomprehensible. As reality was too horrible to be expressed, the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel" allows a similar reality of threat, abandonment, and vulnerability to find a language of its own through fantasy.

> The use of the fairy tale heightens the sense of the Holocaust as other to conventional social realities and bonds. The narrative thus highlights the fact that engagement with the moral dilemmas of the Holocaust is not a kind of identification to be taken lightly, but is rather a process that might prove radically ungrounding.[5]

A sense of deracination and a failed social system is connected to a dialectics of continuity/discontinuity of the characters within themselves and in relation to others, with the cultural as well as with the historical past. The fairy tale conveys this sense of estrangement in a parallel world, thus offering an explanation for the characters' alienation. The fairy tale makes us see the outrageousness of the persecution through the children's eyes: in the novels the children cannot mention it directly since it exceeds their capacity to describe it. Therefore, the narration of "Hansel and Gretel" gives voice to what is beyond their comprehension and their ability to verbalize it.

The novels I will analyze are: 1) *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* by Louise Murphy, 2003; 2) *Kindergarten* by Peter Rushforth, 2006; 3) *Gretel and the Dark* by Eliza Granville, 2014.

4 Daniela Carpi, *Fairy Tales in the Postmodern World. No Tales for Children* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016).

5 Adams, *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature,* 13 of 337.

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1. The True Story of Hansel and Gretel[6]

The True Story of Hansel and Gretel by Louise Murphy is set in 1943. It tells about a father, a stepmother, and their two children who, fleeing from Nazi persecution, reach the edge of a forest. The parents decide to abandon the children because their slower pace would endanger them all; but they also try to save the children by changing their names into Hansel and Gretel: from now on the children must fend for themselves. In the forest they see a hut inhabited by an old and ugly woman (this is, of course, a direct echo of the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" with its gingerbread house and its witch), and meet a community of refugees in a little village. Even if secluded, the place is haunted by the menacing presence of a ruthless SS officer who drinks human blood in order to be rejuvenated. Located in Eastern Poland, the village is overrun first by Russians then by Germans; consequently, the refugees must face many threats to their survival. The children are plunged into difficult situations and must change their identity: they are no longer Jewish; they are now Christian, re-named as Hansel and Gretel. However, this new identity does not protect them from rape and violence, since the survival of each individual is imperiled by overwhelming circumstances, often connected with Nazism, to stress the vulnerability of the individual in a world where institutionalized torture and violence cause the unmaking/destruction of human beings.

In this novel the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel" is revised in order to create a parallel world of sufferance and deracination. The beginning of the novel is similar to the eponymous fairy tale: the children are actually abandoned in a forest, they actually find a hut with an old hag, they actually steal a piece of stale bread out of hunger, and are indeed caught by the witch. Fortunately this is not the dangerous gingerbread house of the original fairy tale inhabited by a wicked witch, but a welcoming place of safety, because the old woman takes in the children and shelters them. The real witch of the novel is the Oberführer who finds nourishment in other people's blood. Rather than eating the flesh of children, as does the witch in the fairy tale, he drinks human blood, being something in between a witch and a vampire.

> He had planned so carefully for how he would live after the war if they lost. "I am the Chalice," he whispered. The great truths had been poured into him, the selected one. He held the knowledge [...] But he must be pure. He must be the purest of the pure. (*TSHG*, 228)

6 Louise Murphy, *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (New York and London: Penguin, 2003), Ebook: further references in the text, abbreviated as *TSHG*.

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This particular fairy tale with its dark background and the apparent betrayal of the parents provides the dangerous circumstances the children run away from; it becomes the metaphor for the inhuman, desperate, and merciless historical period under Nazism.

The world of persecution and torture, of threat and abandonment, but also of eventual survival constituting the background of the fairy tale, becomes the metaphor for the historical reality of violence and murder, hunger and despair under Nazi domination. As mentioned earlier, many elements connect this novel to the fairy tale, elements that are adapted to the message the author wants to convey. The children themselves act out the fairy story, even by assuming the names of its characters, because it allows them to make sense of what appears to be senseless. The events are too horrible for the children to absorb; this is why they use the fairy story, in the attempt to find a language fit to verbalise their alienation. Furthermore, the presence of the oven at the core of the fairy story is a place of destruction, and it also appears in the novel, but with a double function: on the one hand it becomes a place of salvation because the old woman hides the children inside the oven to prevent the Nazis from seizing them; on the other hand, it echoes its horrific function in the historical reality. However, when Gretel loses her mind, she becomes one with the traditional character of the fairy-tale: she repeats "The witch was going to cook us, Hansel" (*TSHG*, 242).

The everyday world follows the enemy's dehumanization code by having recourse also to vampire elements, such as blood sucking in the case of the Oberführer, who reinvigorates himself through blood transfusions from a female prisoner, seen merely as a blood vessel. Margins are blurred: who is the enemy? In the novel the Nazis persecute the Jews, and the Russians persecute the Polish. We see a sort of ethnic war where everybody is against everybody else, with the Jews as the quintessential victims.

The focus of the novel is also a revision of the classical historical perspective: in the wake of Hayden White's theoretical arguments, we must speak of micro-history rather than of macro-history. The heinous events of the Nazis' invasions and wars are pushed into the background; what emerges is the story of the single individual in his struggle for survival. In other words, within the macro-war of WWII we have the micro-war of a group of characters who, in the parallel world of the forest, try to survive by hiding, changing names, searching for food and warmth.

Two legal systems clash against each other: the real, historical world, rooted in the violation of human dignity, and the fictionalized one set in the forest where different rules apply, such as sheltering lost children, stealing food to feed people, and self-sacrificing on the part of the priest.

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The dehumanization of the enemy allows the Nazis to victimize the Jews, and to refuse considering them as legal entities, but rather as objects to be exploited or disposed of. The parallel world of the victims is, on the contrary, characterized by acts of great heroism: the stepmother who kills the rapists of her foster daughter in the forest, the priest who murders the Oberführer to save his niece Nelka, his friend Telek and the child; Magda, wrongly defined as the witch, who welcomes and saves the helpless children wandering in the wood.

Furthermore, the loss of one's identity occurs through the change of one's name. A name is considered the fundamental device both to disappear from history (the adoption of a fairy tale name as a means of self-re-creation, as the construction of a new and safer existence) and to re-appear at the end of the war, and of the novel, when the children recover their lost identities. The most poignant crisis happens when the two children, who have survived all kinds of persecution and trauma, cannot recall their past names. Gretel says: "My other name. I remember the orange. But I can't think what he called me." And Hansel answers: "Your name has to be Gretel" (*TSHG*, 146). In both statements the artificial use of names is evident: Gretel regrets not remembering what name she had before the war, and Hansel answers that she HAS TO BE CALLED Gretel (my emphasis). Name giving is a convention that allows the individual to exist in society: a name is not a natural process, but a social practice and a legal code. The true essence of the individual is not in question. As a way of comparison we may recall the verbal duel between Romeo and Juliet in the balcony scene, which is acted out through the play of the name convention. "You're Gretel. That's your name" Hansel emphasizes once more. On the verge of tears the child uses the name as a safety anchor against physical and moral obliteration.

The children live through the experience of losing their names as a final uprooting, the utter cancellation of themselves, which goes hand in hand with the gradual loss of memories: Gretel tries to hold on to her recollections, that is, to keep her identity, but they become blurred: "She had lost so many memories during the ghetto" (*TSHG*, 9). Moreover, Gretel realizes that a first name is not enough to ensure certified identity: she also needs a last name. Once more we are reminded that in order to exist as a legal persona one needs a family name; to this, according to the UN charter, one must add some education. It is symbolic that the father, in his flight for safety, managed to save three books: a book of mathematics, an atlas, and a book of fairy tales. Mathematics connects the children to the practical world, where things can be measured and numbered, the atlas lets them know where they are (a sense of belonging, of grasping for some roots), and fairy tales nourish their imagination, necessary for the survival of their souls. It is precisely imagination that offers them a way out and suggests a possibility for escape.

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At the end of the novel the recovery of their original names indicates that the children are back into the world of reality.

Even a dreamy experience of harmony and beauty can morph into horror. In fact, during their wandering through the wood the children meet a group of wild ponies, described as immersed in light and translucent. Such an idyllic vision of peace and unblemished natural surroundings turns into a new means of violence, because it is by going in search of the wild ponies that Gretel meets her rapists: hence a new ordeal that utterly traumatizes Gretel, because she loses her mind and imagines to be living in a beautiful and idealized past, characterized by songs and flowers. Her mental disorder recalls Ophelia's madness in *Hamlet:* the songs of both girls have the function of deleting a dark reality of rejection and violence (Hamlet's verbal violence when speaking to Ophelia) and of revealing their secret dreams. In the case of Gretel it also means avoiding responsibility (protecting and guiding her younger brother) and going back to a pre-rape, pre-war time of happiness and security.

Besides being a Jew, insanity could also endanger one's life: Nazism had declared that the insane had to be eliminated. "The Germans killed crazy people. Crazy people weren't productive" (*TSHG*, 149). The dignity of a human being was not considered, because the individual was reduced just to a means of production. It was part of the Nazis' program to attain a pure, unblemished Arian race, which entailed the scientific elimination of all those that were considered unfit for the project.

> By procuring the skulls of the Jewish/Bolshevik/Communists who represent the prototype of the repulsive but characteristic subhuman, we now have the chance to obtain a palpable scientific document. [...] Skeletons should also be carefully harvested and cleaned of their flesh. They should be labeled and packed in separate bags. (*TSHG*, 189)

Consequently, Gretel's life is now at risk, since she has lost her mind after the trauma of rape.

The True Story of Hansel and Gretel becomes therefore emblematic of a legal system that has been subverted: the protection of the individual has been changed into a classification of what it means to be human.

In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child article 3 states:

> 3.1 In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
> 3.2 State Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take

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> all appropriate legislative or administrative measures.
> 3.3 State Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services, and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform to the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health and in the area of suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.[7]

These fundamental rights, that go beyond all divisions into nations and that pertain to all children *qua* human beings, were evidently not respected during the Nazi period: the several charters on human rights actually stemmed from the violation of the dignity of the individual during WWII.

> Humans have dignity and [...] this dignity inhering in the human person is the source and ground of rights. [...] on the other hand it is said that people have a right to dignity, or a right to have their dignity protected. In the former usage, dignity is presented as the ground of human rights; in the latter usage "dignity" is presented as the content of human rights, that is what the human rights are rights to.[8]

This dark tale of abandonment and survival becomes emblematic of a whole social situation under Nazism: the Jews as a people were objectified, delegitimized, deprived of their human identity and of any national protection. Hence this novel, as a true moral parable, speaks of the loss and recovery of the children's identity and, at the end, of their reintegration into the legal system.

The device of changing people's names occurs throughout the whole novel. The Germans actually steal those children who particularly fit into their aesthetic canon: those who are blond and slender, with blue eyes. To achieve their ideal of a perfect Arian race the Nazis try to enhance it through the injection of young pure blood; the same happens with the Oberführer, who enhances his physical prowess by drinking new healthy blood. This is why children are stolen, given new names and their identification papers destroyed. Thus, by erasing their past, new German nationals are artificially created.

We are reminded of an analogous situation in W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001), which deals with the consequences of the Nazi persecution on the psyche of a Jewish child. The main character, Jacques Austerlitz, a professor of history of architecture, late in life finds out that he had been adopted. From the moment of this discovery he embarks on a quest for his origins. He no longer knows who he

7 Available at: http://I:/Human%20rights/convention%20for%20the%20rights%20of%20child.htm (Last access 27 december 2015).

8 Jeremy Waldron, "Dignity and Rank," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* XLVIII.2 (2007): 201 – 237, 203 – 204. Quoted in Jeanne Gaakeer, "Dignity and Disgrace in Law and Literature," in *Literature and Human Rights*, ed. Ian Ward (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014): 309 – 328, 311.

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is. Austerlitz considers *a posteriori* the devastation that the loss of his mother and family had produced in him as a child, combined with the spiritual violence of a forced conversion to Catholicism imposed upon him by his new parents. This sort of violation can be defined as "violation of one's trust in future," because Jacques, the child, cannot evolve according to his cultural origins, cannot choose what religion he prefers: he has been robbed of his traditions. Although Austerlitz has not been directly harassed, he suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because of Nazi persecution.[9]

The final recovery of the children's real names becomes a kind of re-creation:

> He [the father] spoke each name slowly, quietly [...] He spoke their names over and over, and watched these gifts brought out of darkness, these bits of flesh, this blood of his blood and bone of his bone, his children, begin to smile as they became, once more, themselves. (*TSHG*, 297)

The mention of blood and flesh transforms this scene into the Biblical creation of man in *Genesis:* the father gives new birth to his children by recognizing them as flesh of his flesh. The name adds the legal element, as if to say that man is a spiritual, physical, and a legal being within society. As the ethical voice of the novel, the witch pronounces the final moral of the story: "We can never let the world take our memories of love away, and if there are no memories, we must invent love all over again." Imagination and love are the saving factors in situations where our humanity risks being erased.

2. Kindergarten [10]

Kindergarten by Peter Rushforth is a moving retelling of "Hansel and Gretel," where a woman is murdered during a terrorist attack, leaving her three sons in the care of their grandmother, Lilli. As the four prepare to celebrate Christmas, they are drawn into a rich, resonant world of memories, where Lilli must confront the horrors of the Nazi persecution she was able to survive. After the loss of her entire family in the Holocaust, the recent, violent death of her daughter finally allows Lilli to embrace life again. By reaching out to a new generation,

9 See Daniela Carpi, "Violation of Human Rights in Holocaust/Post-Holocaust era," *Pòlemos* 8.1 (2014): 175 – 192.

10 Peter Rushforth, *Kindergarten* (Isle of Man: MP Publishing Limited, 2006), Ebook: further references in the text, abbreviated as *K*.

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sharing with her grandsons her artistic vision of everyone she loved, she can now forge a shared path toward peace and reconciliation.

Kindergarten can be defined as a documentary novel: it is structured around a series of letters and photographs which the author of the novel has gathered, in the attempt to keep the traces of the children who had disappeared in the camps or those who had survived the Holocaust. The text of some of the letters suddenly interrupts the flow of the narrative's main plot: the letters are reported without comment, thus forming a secret, obscure undercurrent. Their meaning will gradually become clear in the course of the novel.

These letters represent the "footprints" that were erased by the Nazis, in the extermination of thousands of children. "Traces" connects to the concept of "alterity": in the novel the letters of the parents and of the children themselves stress the sense of deracination and alienness experienced by all Jews, even those who did not die in the camps. Their citizenship was cancelled, and they were deprived of state protection, if they were living in Germany, hence their quest for a hosting nation that would recognize their rights *qua* human beings and grant them social existence.

This particular kind of Holocaust narrative presents two different forms of "traces": the letters as the metaphorical footprints of the victims, of their former presence, and of their struggle to exist legally; and the connecting narrative of Lilli Danielsohn's grandson, Corrie, the discoverer and reader of the letters, who evokes and gives voice to those distant dead. Therefore these letters give a painful testimony of the victims' sense of disruption at seeing their citizenship obliterated. In Holocaust writing the novel embodies a concern with "the degree to which the written word is able to preserve a trace both of history itself and of the particular losses the history of the Holocaust entails."[11]

The violent actions portrayed in the novel are of a double nature: they evoke both the terrorist attack that kills the children's parents, and the memories that the children's grandmother Lilli recalls while preparing a German Christmas celebration.

The fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel" is the leitmotif of the novel that is constantly re-told during the Christmas preparations: it undermines the apparent comfort of the family reunion, suggesting the presence of a hurtful and threatening world outside the house. That outside world has already witnessed the killing of the children's parents in the terrorist attack, and a past of sufferance and desperation during the Holocaust.

11 Adams, *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, 3.

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The opening quotations from Anne Frank's diary and from Brecht's "Children's crusade" pave the way for the real meaning of the novel: escape, wandering, ruins, crowds of displaced people. The narration of the fairy story of "Hansel and Gretel" sets the background and it is told over and over again from different perspectives. The first narration stresses the apparent cruelty of the parents who decide to send the children into the forest, prey of wild beasts. Lack of food and the necessity to survive trigger the parents' plan: the children's death would provide their own possibility for survival. This seemingly heartless action echoes that of other parents trying to send their children away from Germany to English boarding houses during the war years in order to give them the possibility to survive, be educated, and to offer them a future. Thus the apparent cruelty of these parents who deprive their children's lives of love and protection in the comfort of their home, who cast them into the loneliness of a foreign land is actually a desperate attempt at sheltering them from imminent danger. The heartrending memories of the Holocaust are superimposed on two terrorist attacks: the first against the children's parents that killed them, and the second against a school, where a number of children are taken hostage. The present day terrorist attacks merge with the recollections of Nazi persecution through the letters that testify to the horrors of that period.

The threat of the world outside contrasts with the apparent peace inside the house, where Christmas preparations take place and the song "Tannenbaum" keeps returning as a leitmotif. The jarring contrast is uncanny: fear bursts out of known surroundings, out of a tranquil setting, where the unexpected suddenly subverts the expected. The peaceful atmosphere inside the house is undermined also by strange and fearful memories emerging from repressed emotions: "The memory of humiliation and mockery never died: Each time the memory was revived, then feelings returned as intense as they had been at the time they were first experienced" (*K*, 54).

These recollections are punctuated by bits and fragments of letters sent during the war to a Mr. High who was supposed to welcome some children to his school and to shelter Jewish children. In the letters a recurring name is that of Nickolaus Mittler, who repeatedly asks Mr. High to send him additional documents that the Nazis demand in order to prevent his flight.

The second mention of "Hansel and Gretel" occurs when the children are waiting for a cartoon on television dealing with the fairy tale, but the show is switched off because the story is too frightening: who would ever want to frighten children? This rhetorical question, that reminds us of all the horrors committed during the war years, is obviously ironic, because this is exactly what had been perpetrated during WWII. The fairy story has another artistic layering: the narration of "Hansel and Gretel" takes place both in words (the story itself),

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in images (on the screen), and in painting, because Lilli Danielshon is a gifted painter and has given a personal representation of this story.

To increase the horror of the underlying story of "Hansel and Gretel" another very cruel fairy tale comes to mind: Bluebeard's tale. In a documentary description of photographs survived from the war, one of the first scenes shows heaps of "dead bodies of human beings hacked to pieces" (*K*, 190). A metaphorical perspective runs through the whole novel, where Corrie finds in his house a hidden room whose door he can open with a small key, previously gone unnoticed. There he finds piles and piles of letters (the letters mentioned earlier) testifying to Jewish sufferance and attempt to escape.

> Set in the wall of the bedroom was a locked door, a paneled white-painted door with a brass handle. On the key-ring was a little key he had not seen before. [...] he was drawn on by curiosity. [...] Beyond the bedroom door he stepped into darkness. [...] The floor was white with the spilled contents of files which had fallen. [...]Then, idly sifting through the papers at his feet, like the valueless litter left in an abandoned room, he came across the first of the letters which made him pause. [...] Doors began to open, deep inside his head. (*K*, 1167)

If the former passage speaks of the terrible violation of the human dignity of the victims that were deprived of identity and respect even in death (mere heaps of bodies), the latter (the metaphorical one) offers an image of the apocalyptic subversion of order caused by the Nazis. The scene is symbolic, because upon opening the secret door Corrie is on the threshold between two worlds: the past and the present, one where justice, order and deserved punishment are enforced, and one where all sense of justice has been superseded by terror and persecution. The written words, symbolized by the letters, signify the written code of the law that has been subverted and re-formulated to reflect a dictator's will. The letters, witnessing what history tried to cancel, are haphazardly strewn on the floor, as human limbs are tossed and scattered in photographs: bodies without names.

The metaphor of "Hansel and Gretel" often undermines a safe and familiar scene: during the Christmas preparation a gingerbread house is built; it stands for the "heimlich," the place of security and comfort. But the following words thrust us back to the tale of horror, reminding us of the Holocaust: "waiting for the approach of the abandoned children" (*K*, 514). We are at the same time inside and outside both of reality and history, also because what Lilli sees as a re-creation of a German Christmas ritual is actually a "creation from books and research, not from memory. Christmas was a feast she would never have kept when she was in Germany" (*K*, 523). In other words, Lilli and her Jewish family had always been outsiders, as Hansel and Gretel are in the story.

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Jewish celebrations follow a certain ritual, and certain rules must be respected if one wants to be considered a Jew: it is not only a question of religion, but of ancestry. "Second degree, a child with one Jewish grandparent, descent from female line being Jewish law" (*K*, 531). Corrie's discovery of his Jewishness implies a re-examination of his whole life, which at this point appears to be full of blanks and absences. Once more his discovery is compared to the opening of Bluebeard's forbidden door: his past appears surrounded by death and his identity deleted. It looks as if his faith in trust has become a sham.

> Discovering his Jewishness – it couldn't be denied, could it? – he felt as though he had opened some forbidden door, made some shocking discovery which overturned all the certainties of his life. He felt as though he had suddenly discovered that he'd been adopted, and that all his assumptions about his parentage, all his beliefs about who he was were completely false. He had no concrete dogma to hold on to. (*K*, 576)

This sudden revelation annuls the religious and national codes he had lived up to. A new interstice opens up and he feels like Hansel in the forest: deracinated, at risk, dispossessed, de-familiarized. The songs, created for the story of Hansel and Gretel as well as Lilli's painting convey this sense of alienness: the children had even invented a mythical land, Rousseau, which represented the apex of the various readings and re-readings of the fairy story.

Another metaphorical perspective in the constant echo of the story of Hansel and Gretel is offered by the letters the various parents had sent to Mr. High, the director of the English boarding house that was to welcome also Jewish children. They demonstrate how parents had been forced with a heavy heart to send their children away, which is exactly the starting point of the fairy tale: the historical situation caused the abandonment of the children in the "wilderness."

Moreover, a letter by Katharina Viehmann reveals that Jews had lost their German citizenship: the means by which the Germans deprived them of legal rights. Their existence as German subjects had been erased, and persecutions became possible because Jews no longer belonged to any nation. "[...] the Nazis had made her and her family *Untermenschen,* subhumans, and therefore disgusting. All the apparatus had swung into action against millions of people who had no right to be treated as human beings" (*K*, 2417). Lost in a nameless crowd, each individual is cast out of history. The description of a scene in a movie set in Berlin marks this obliteration: the Jews are a formless, faceless, and nameless crowd, moving to unknown destinations in "an immense and frozen emptiness" (*K*, 1529). The snow that covers their footsteps recalls the snow that hides the children's footsteps in "Hansel and Gretel," standing for the metaphorical cancellation of their identities.

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The contraposition between the happy ending of fairy tales – where children always triumph – with the historical reality of children's elimination is jarring. However, in the course of the novel it is clear that "Hansel and Gretel" on one hand acts as a metaphor for the abandonment and extermination of children during the Holocaust; therefore reality itself impinges on the fairy story (the children are burnt to death in the witch's oven, a mirror image of the gas chambers in the camps). On the other hand the tale represents a symbolic victory over the dark side of history, marking the elimination of the wicked witch inside her own oven perpetrated by the children. Therefore two endings emerge: a positive and a negative, both in the fairy story and in historical reality, because, with the elimination of the tyrant (Hitler), historical reality eventually offers a relatively happy ending, and the restoration of order and of laws protecting all individuals, independently of what nation they belong to: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948 and speaks of the protection of individuals above and beyond divisions into nations.

Furthermore, even in the darkest recesses of that historical period, in her diary Anne Frank's words give voice to hope:

> I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us all. I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. (*K*, 1588)

Anne Frank was writing from her hiding place, creating her own fable with a happy outcome: Imagination vs. Reality, illuminating reality through her vision. Her poetic perspective, that rejects the horror of the war even while giving her own testimonial, contrasts with an interview with a Dutch journalist who utterly denies the truth of the camps, saying that they were only a work of fiction: "It is fiction sustained by Zionist propaganda" (*K*, 1586). Fiction as reality, reality as fiction: coping with the horror of reality by having recourse to a fairy story, but annulling the truth of reality by fictionalizing it. In the novel there is a constant shift between truth and fiction: they are inextricably intertwined. Hansel and Gretel hold hands at the edge of the pathless forest in the same way as, in a particular scene of the novel, Jewish children held hands waiting for a train that should carry them to safety.

The letters that form part of the novel contribute to this double perspective: they are written, hence in some way they fictionalize reality, yet they are the real testimonials of what actually took place. The reader of the letters, Corrie, represents the readers of the novel, who know more than the characters in the story – for example, the gruesome outcome of the hopes and illusions described in the letters. There is no way out of horror: the story/history must be completed so that

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the turmoil may subside and a new system may be restored that will prevent any future violation of human rights. As often happens in literary texts, it is the function of literature to nurture the seeds of survival. Actually, the novel mentions a book that was among Lilli's many books in London: a copy of *The Children's Haggadah*, published in 1937, written in Hebrew. It represents the children's main connection with their past, the fragments from their ruins, to use T. S. Eliot's image. From this ancient alphabet and Jewish relics a new birth will emerge, a new land and new laws. The religious perspective adds one more element to the fairy story: "God will not forsake us – Hansel said to Gretel" (*K*, 1802), but the apparent silence of God emphasizes a heartless event both in history and in the fairy story.

The actual connection between historical witnessing and metaphorical reenactment occurs when Corrie discovers the secret room. "He couldn't tell Lilli what his main thoughts were about, that inner room in the bedroom, the entry into the forest, pathless, glassless, black as perpetual night within a few feet of the edge" (*K*, 2074). The room within a room is the other, repressed side of history, the unconscious of society (its burdensome sense of guilt) that hides testimonials, such as letters and photographs. It echoes Bluebeard's tale, where the corpses of the Marquis's dead wives are substituted by the relics that history has tried to efface.

The secret room with its written content is also a metaphor for the novels under consideration: they give voice to what society has willed to repress for too many years. The Holocaust must find a voice, even a fictional one, to prevent the horror from falling into oblivion.

3. Gretel and the Dark[12]

This novel opens in *medias res*, that is, from a story of children's abduction: the Pied Piper of Hamelin who leads a host of children away into danger by playing a magic music that lures even ogres and other monsters. The apparent harmonious sound of music actually acts as the horrific action that wins against the monstrosity of ogres and rats. Children are actually equated to rats; they are drawn out of the land as Jews were drawn out of Egypt in *Exodus*. The time of the year is an inverted spring that, as in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, is not the "sweetest month" (an echo of the opening verses of Chaucer's *Canterbury*

12 Eliza Granville, *Gretel and the Dark* (London: Penguin, 2014), Ebook: further references in the text, abbreviated as *GD*.

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Tales) but "the cruelest month": rain, people falling, wails from the lake. The fairy-tale elements of the story of Hansel and Gretel are inserted into such dreary surroundings: the gingerbread house of the wicked witch, and the white pebbles the children scatter in order to be able to get out of the dark wood. However, from the very beginning, the enchanted forest of the novel appears to be not a place of death, but of salvation, as in the texts analysed earlier: "One step, two, and we're inside the enchanted forest" (*GD*, 1). Even if the forest is full of threats – icy witch breaths, phantom sentries, roots coil, mists – the characters (we do not yet know who they are) manage to overcome danger and to sleep safely: "We wake, uneaten" (*GD*, 1).

There is another character with them, the Shadow, whom they have to carry as a burden: a sort of carrion, as thin as a blade, but very heavy to drag along. This ominous opening repeats almost identically at the end of the novel, where the same setting is used, but at that point its metaphorical valences emerge powerfully. The same words are uttered, the same call: "Kukulka," "Kuckcuck." "It's not safe here. We must go further" (*GD*, 2). It is a culmination of the story as if to suggest that most of what apparently happens is actually inside the mind of Krista, the main character. What is the meaning of this ambiguous character "the Shadow"? Evidently it represents the burden of the trauma, the unexpressed fear that cannot be stifled and that will forever prey upon their minds. "Shadows never last long" Krista says to Daniel while they are fleeing the camp. Once they manage to defeat fear and memories they can go faster: "Now we can travel faster, just you and me" (*GD*, 89). They must overcome the trauma, they must make sense of it, if they want to survive, not only physically but also mentally.

The whole story focuses on the Holocaust, and in particular on the persecution of Krista and Daniel, two children who somehow manage to survive. Krista is not Jewish, but she is the daughter of a Nazi doctor who experiments on prisoners in the camps. This doctor is killed because he wants to stop torturing prisoners, having become obsessed with his work. Symptoms of psychosis are evident in his constantly washing his hands, which is a practical but mainly metaphorical action, as if he were trying to wash his conscience of the terrible sins that he is forced to commit. Krista, a young and very capricious child with no mother, is interned with Jewish children in a camp. Her only consolation is her doll Lottie, which she trusts with her thoughts, stories, anger and desperation. In the camp she meets Daniel, who becomes her only real friend and whom she tries to protect from the persecution of uncle Hraben, who turns out to be a seducer and a rapist, as well as being a sadistic torturer. Krista is violated by him, humiliated, and abandoned.

The fairy story of Hansel and Gretel becomes a leitmotif in the novel: it is narrated first by Greet, a maidservant who used to look after Krista when her fa-

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ther was living. Gretel/Greet is therefore the narrator of her own story, which she tells over and over again from different viewpoints. She is the narrator, Greet/Gretel, but sometimes she is also the witch, when Krista is angry with her. The gingerbread house is there, in the midst of the wood: sometimes it represents the food that Greet bakes for Krista (therefore salvation and nourishment); at other times it represents the allure that draws Krista inside the wood (the food that Hraben offers her if she joins him in his office; his office/tower as the dark wood that the girl faces and enters to be devoured by the wolf/Hraben). "Little Red Riding Hood" is also there, lurking in the background to re-echo and to merge with the story of Hansel and Gretel: they both epitomize the monstrosity of the Holocaust and the tests the children have to overcome in order to grow to adulthood and survive.

Apparently, the plot presents two stories: the one centred on Krista and her slow degradation and imprisonment inside a camp, side by side with the animal-people (this is how the Jews are called), and the one centred on Lilie and Benjamin. Even if we reach the explanation only at the very end, still we realize that the two stories are connected. Lilie is discovered bruised and naked by Doktor Josef Breuer in Gmunden: Breuer is a Jewish physician who has so far managed to avoid persecution. In this story persecution is just about to start: there are signs of its beginning in the attacks to Jewish shops, but the mass slaughter has not yet begun. Still, Lilie constantly speaks of a monster that she must eliminate: this is her aim and her duty. She does not reveal where she comes from and who has attacked her. When she speaks people do not understand her and they consider her a lunatic. So she is actually deprived of a voice, because she is not believed and must keep silent if she does not want to be sent to an asylum.

This deprivation of a voice was the fate of the survivors from the camps, who could not even narrate their experiences because people did not believe them. The humiliations that they had undergone in the camps were added to what followed upon their return: the impossibility of telling. Throughout the novel we think that Lilie seems a sort of prophetess who foresees what will happen and who tries to prevent future history by taking upon herself the duty to kill the monster (Hitler). No one ever mentions Hitler's actual name in the story, but there are allusions to an unspecified monster, who might be also one of the many guards in the camps.

There is indeed the possibility to change history by cancelling its starting point, as in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991) where the main character proceeds backwards in the story so that the Holocaust is erased before it even begins. If Lilie succeeded, nothing of what is narrated in the second plot would happen. But sadly enough at the end it is clear that the story of Lilie and Benjamin is

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pure imagination: it is Krista who invents it all and manages to survive in her flight by narrating this story to Daniel. Daniel is very severely wounded: his arms have been dislocated, his breast is covered with dog's bites, his wounds are infected, and he can barely walk. Krista succeeds in convincing him to fight for his survival by narrating him stories.

Everybody asks for stories: Krista forces her maidservant Greet to tell her the story of Hansel and Gretel repeatedly; in the camp Cecily, another storyteller, helps the children by averting their attention from the horrors of the camp through the invention of stories; Daniel asks Krista to go on narrating; Krista herself manages to avoid crude reality by repeating to her doll Lottie the stories she had heard.

However, the fairy stories that are recalled cannot start with the classic "Once upon a time," because the girl realizes that the stories needed cannot be the usual ones. The ogre is far too frightening to be subdued by such a classic beginning. This is why Krista disguises the actual horror by having recourse to a story which is just as horrific: Hansel and Gretel. This fairy story epitomizes the historical events in more than one detail: first of all it speaks of children's abandonment and deracination, and in the case of the Holocaust children were often torn away from their parents, which is the violation of one of the fundamental rights of children. Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts:

> 9.1. States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. Such determination may be necessary in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child by the parents, or one where the parents are living separately and a decision must be made as to the child's place of residence.

Then the children face the unknown, that is, the wood and the witch: their survival is at risk. Art. 6.2 of the Convention asserts: "States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child." Children are eliminated exactly because they represent the future of the Jewish people and the Jews must be exterminated. A symbolic scene towards the end is the one when Agniezska kills pigeons in the tower to provide food. The heartless ripping out of their heads recalls the heartless eliminations of human beings in the camps.

Moreover, the story focuses on an oven that should be the children's final destination, because the witch wants to cook and eat them. Once more, the allusion to the ovens where people were gassed in the camps is evident. At the end, the children manage to set themselves free from the wicked witch and cook her

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instead in the oven, which suggests a comparison with the revenge they carry out against Agniezska, one of the children's killers in the camp.

Lilie constantly asserts that she is a machine and as such she is neither dead nor alive; she speaks and moves on electric-like impulses. Her ambiguous language masks the dehumanization of the Jews that was scientifically carried out in the Shoah. As a first step they were deprived of legal personhood and humanity through language: in the novel they do not exist in language and are called animal-people, the camp is the zoo. Obviously declaring herself to be a machine helps her annihilate fear, pain and sufferance, because machines have no soul or emotion. By experiencing no feelings Lilie deprives her torturers of their sadistic enjoyment: they cannot make her suffer.

The Nazis subvert the sense of reality by creating and manipulating fear: the Jews are "dangerous creatures" and are kept "behind the walls, and there are guards and fierce dogs to make sure they never get out" (*GD*, 455). The operation of dehumanization and subversion of reality takes place by shifting the focus of monstrosity: it is the Jew who is the monster, the alien, the non-person, not the persecutors. However, Krista and Lilie speak of ogres and monsters, thus twisting around the concept of monstrosity and throwing it back onto the Germans. If societies understand themselves as narratives, the alienated society that the children construct must be emplotted with narratives.

However, the story of Hansel and Gretel is also frequently metaphorised in another story that Greet narrates at the beginning – the story of a farmer "who lets his children watch as he slaughtered a pig" (*GD*, 472). The murderous action of the story is echoed by Greet's chopping a piece of meat, brandishing a sharp knife. Both actions painfully remind the reader of the slaughters and tortures in the camps, so once more a story narrates what is un-narrateable. Even if Krista does not actually understand what is taking place, she is in some way negatively influenced by it and starts drawing pictures of monsters having their heads cut off.

The novel gives its own definition of monstrosity: "monster: [...] in modern parlance the word could imply physical defect or deformity, even grotesque abnormality" (*GD*, 1373). The text does not have this sort of monstrosity in it, but rather a metaphorical or psychological one. This is why monstrosity is far more threatening, because it hides behind the screen of so-called "normality." You cannot distinguish it, and you cannot defend yourself from it.

This perspective comes to the fore at the end of the novel, when the fugitives, Krista and Daniel, meet Agniezska, one of the guards in the camp they have run away from. She appears as their savior, because she shelters and feeds them, but in reality she is trying to use the children as a screen, in order to escape the clutches of the allies who have invaded the country. The peo-

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ple from the ambulance they meet in the forest consider her one of the survivors, because they cannot perceive the monstrosity in her until she utters a sentence she has learnt wrongly in Polish from Daniel: this is what actually gives her away as one of the children's killers. Monstrosity therefore is often a dark, hidden side not immediately perceivable. Krista calls her the witch.

Krista's father reproached Greet when he heard what sort of stories she invented, but his words actually annulled the reality of the history he was helping create: "Such tales spring from sick imagination. Childhood is precious. It's where the building blocks of life are laid. We have a duty to protect our little ones from hearing about such atrocities" (*GD*, 489). But atrocities were actually committed in the camps; ironically, his words, the words of one involved in these atrocities, are a comment on the sort of violation the children are undergoing.

The story of Hansel and Gretel has also another function in *Gretel and the Dark:* Krista uses it to carry out her revenge. For instance, when she overhears unpleasant talk of the maids in the house, she imagines she is pushing them into the witch's oven; the ovens in the camps are constantly recalled through these metaphorical allusions.

However, Krista's fate is sealed when her father dies; she had often gone to the camp-zoo when her papa was working in the laboratories, but at the end she is interned among the victims. Her fate is equated with that of Daniel, the Jewish child, who becomes her only friend. Such a detail reminds us of J. Boyne's novel, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (2006) that sees the final solution of both the Jewish and the German child who happen to die in the same gas chamber.

In the course of the novel, as in the previous ones, Krista is deprived of her social status: no living mother and then no living father, no relatives who can take care of her, as she is considered a sort of lunatic. She is deprived of legal existence: her family name is cancelled and she is given a new status in the camp, becoming part of the animal-people. Her dehumanization takes place first with the loss of her family name and of German citizenship, then through the loss of the status as a human being: the animal-people are considered rats or vermins and they become a plague to be extirpated (a nod to the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin who rids the town of "the terrible plague of vermin" (*GD*, 660). After this, she is dehumanized through her sexual violation at the hands of Hraben, through her suffering from hunger, cold and thirst, through lack of education. However, in the novel it is the prisoners themselves who try to keep up their human dignity by teaching children some basic knowledge. Erika insists that Krista goes to the camp school: education is important both to nourish her soul and help her survive.

Lilie/Krista repeats: "Books [...] they've not only been a solace during the long years but also provided the keys to understanding other people's ideas

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and achievements, their hopes and fears, quirks and foibles, their dreams, … their demons" (*GD*, 4789). Indeed, what helps Krista survive is imagination.

> I try doing what I've always done – escape into that secret part of me where by magic or heroism I make things turn out differently, leaving behind an automaton, a machine with no feelings whatsoever – but today I can't. A door has closed. The ideas have gone. The words aren't there. Perhaps this is what happens when you invent stories inside stories that are themselves inside a fairy tale: they become horribly real. (*GD*, 4592)

Obviously these novels on the Holocaust are written in its aftermath and are produced by people who are not direct survivors; that is to say that they are reconstructions through testimonials, interviews, and documents in the present time. Therefore their authors are aware of what kinds of violation were perpetrated and what laws were promulgated for the protection of human rights, and of Children's rights in particular, as a consequence of the Holocaust. The Convention on the Rights of the Child openly speaks of the protection and rights the child is entitled to: such laws are emplotted and recalled in the novels under consideration as a jarring accusation of what really took place.

Conclusions

Because the horror exceeds the capacity of language to describe, in these novels the impossibility of narrating the Holocaust takes the form of a fairy story which extends also into the future of the characters. In *Gretel and the Dark* the characters reach old age: they have survived, have married, had children who had children in their turn, to whom they go on narrating their story always disguised as the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel. The question is: is it right to burden future generations with the details of the Holocaust, ensuring that the truth is never forgotten? Krista decides that it is impossible to pass on such memories in full; hence the recourse to the fairy tale, which acts as a mediation.

Fairy tales provide the metaphorical language that succeeds in telling yet not telling, in revealing while veiling, in explaining the inexplicable. These three novels belong to Holocaust literature, which in this analysis, takes the form of a discussion on the violation of children's rights and human dignity, of the elimination of the victims' subjectivity. In a world where torture is institutionalized, the vulnerability of children is emphasized, thus underscoring the unmaking of the human being: the collapse of the spiritual subject through physical disintegration. Such disintegration encompasses disfigurement and debasement.

The Holocaust is a terrible historical sin for future generations to bear, a sin that has subverted the concept of history as progress. Having recourse to the

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dark side of fairy tales avoids dealing with the inexpressibility of historical events. It is necessary to go back to a past literary tradition in order to try to encompass that which has no precedent. Literary tradition on the one hand, unprecedented situation on the other: how to contain the uncontainable. Fairy tales are our footprints, rooted deep in time: this is why they are suited to the description of what will always remain as traumatic traces in our historical past. They have the power to evoke sufferance without revealing its whole meaning, thus avoiding the ultimate attempt at reaching full comprehension.

In *Gretel and the Dark* there is a Shadow that must be dragged along thus leaving traces in the mud, traces that can reveal the children's presence. It is another metaphor for the traumatic experiences that these novels describe, which will always remain in our social conscience. History will have to re-elaborate such traumas: this is the function of literature through fairy tales. In the immersive experience that Holocaust novels generate lies the important contribution to the appreciation of the charter of Human Rights, while appealing to the reader's sympathetic imagination.

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